

Iron Fact Sheet

Why is Iron Important in a Healthy Diet?

- Iron is a mineral needed to keep our bodies healthy.
- Two-thirds of iron is used in the body to form hemoglobin and myoglobin, needed to carry oxygen in the blood and muscles.
- Iron is also essential for the regulation of cell growth.

What are the Signs of Iron Deficiency?

- Feeling tired and weak;
- Decreased work and school performance;
- Slow cognitive and social development during childhood;
- Difficulty maintaining body temperature;
- Decreased immune function, with increase susceptibility to infection; and
- Glossitis (an inflamed tongue).

Who is at Risk for Iron Deficiency?

- Pregnant women;
- Preterm and low birth weight infants;
- Teenage girls;
- Women of childbearing age, especially those with heavy menstrual losses;
- People with renal failure, especially those on dialysis;
- People with gastrointestinal disorders who do not absorb iron normally; and
- Athletes, especially female athletes, swimmers, distant runners, and vegetarian athletes.

Are there Different Forms of Dietary Iron?

- There are two forms of dietary iron – heme and nonheme.
- Heme iron is found in animal foods, such as red meats, fish and poultry. Heme iron is better absorbed than nonheme.
- Nonheme iron is found in plant foods such as lentils, beans, spinach and tofu.
- Eating foods high in vitamin C (with iron-rich foods) will improve the absorption of the iron.
- Tannins (found in tea), calcium, and phytates (found in legumes and whole grains) can decrease the absorption of nonheme iron. It is best to consume these foods separate from high iron foods.

How Much Iron Do I Need?

- To avoid iron toxicity, consult with your physician before taking iron supplements.